

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

CHRISTOPHER M. STEVENSON, PhD

Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Easter Island archaeology? What triggered your interest?

When I was a sophomore at Pennsylvania State University, I participated in an archaeological excavation in Israel. It was a great experience, one that included living in a kibbutz and digging ancient wells full of pottery and sheep bones. I became inspired by the discipline of archaeology. Some five years later I read *The Ethnology of Easter Island* and *The Mystery of Easter Island* as part of a seminar on complex societies in the Pacific. That "set the hook" and, with a little homework, I was on my way to Rapa Nui for my dissertation fieldwork.

Q. Who or what do you consider your most significant influence either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?

As for Rapa Nui, my most sustained interest has been in the development of obsidian hydration dating. These efforts have focused on long-term laboratory experiments directed towards understanding the hydration process, as well as the application of the technique to Rapa Nui prehistory. One of my main motivations was to nail down the chronology of Rapa Nui and to establish a reliable dating method. Great strides have been made toward these goals, and new accelerated hydration lab experiments are underway to improve the method even further. Having a complex lab experiment work out is really a thrill!

Q. What theory or project of yours turned out to be either different from what you expected or surprised you?

Many years ago I was working on obsidian composition and its effect on glass durability with Jim Mazer at the Argonne National Laboratory. At that time, the government was studying obsidian as an analog to nuclear waste glass. When we were in the early stages of conducting water diffusion experiments and compositional analyses, the first four samples suggested an answer – it was the structural water content of the obsidian that controlled the inward diffusion of ambient water. We thought it might play a minor role but did not dream that it would be the foundation of the way that we predict hydration rates twelve years later.

Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

I would have likely ended up working as a Mayan archaeologist in Honduras. That was "Plan B."

Q. What was your best Eureka moment?

Ten years ago the idea was put forth by Joan Wozniak who noted that lithic mulch gardens were present in the Te

Niu area. At the same time we were finding garden soils beneath rock and boulder distributions, and next to habitation sites. It occurred to me that Rapa Nui was one enormous rock garden with many variations on this theme. The rugged landscape was not natural; it was a highly manipulated cultural landscape where each stone had been moved for agricultural purposes. That is when things really became interesting and opened up a whole new line of investigation.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) on Easter Island in the future?

It is becoming clear that Rapa Nui soils were initially nutrient-poor or became depleted through centuries of agriculture, and that played a major role in the evolution and collapse of the society. Our research team (Sonia Haoa and Thegn Ladefoged) has started a project to look at soil fertility on an island-wide level. We will also monitor the subsurface environments (e.g. temperature, humidity) of rock gardens to look at buffering mechanisms that were developed to protect plants from harsh growing conditions.

Q. What is your favorite Easter Island site and why?

Within the upland/inland settlement pattern and amongst the agricultural fields, there are some unique sites. They have platforms, elite houses and earth ovens, all adjacent to a plaza. These may have been community centers where tubers were collected and redistributed. Proving this will show how the elite were involved in agricultural production. This is the next site I plan to excavate.

Q. What myth or misinformation about Easter Island would you like to dispel?

There are many popular misconceptions about the island. I guess that the most long-lasting one is the disbelief that the carefree Polynesians could have moved the statues. Whatever happened to the concepts of inventiveness, organization and hard work?

Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Easter Island?

Rapa Nui is a very difficult place to live, and it is still very non-western despite the modern trappings. Living in another culture is stressful: are you being understood correctly? What is expected of you in social situations? For the most part, routine needs can be addressed on a daily basis, but it also can take days to solve a once-simple problem. And, you are almost always the topic of island gossip.

Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Easter Island archaeology or anthropology?

Any long-term project on Rapa Nui requires an on-island colleague who is also a co-Principal Investigator. This provides an opportunity for a Rapanui scholar, and he/she will help navigate the maze of cultural norms and difficulties that you are bound to encounter.



Chris at the 2004 Conference in Viña del Mar.